

LAKE OKEECHOBEE & ESTUARY RECOVERY



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Recovery efforts well under way



"Our commitment to protect and restore this vital habitat is unwavering," said Gov. Jeb Bush in announcing the State's Lake Okeechobee & Estuary Recovery Plan.

Since Gov. Jeb Bush unveiled the Lake Okeechobee and Estuary Recovery – or LOER – plan in October, Florida is making strides in implementing its new bold and aggressive plan to improve the health of Lake Okeechobee and the downstream Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie estuaries.

LOER includes five "Fast-Track" construction projects and numerous interagency initiatives that will *improve* water quality, *expand* water storage, *enhance* lake health and *facilitate* land acquisition to provide short-term relief and long-term protection.

Despite facing hurdles from the effects of five hurricanes, Florida is moving toward our recovery goals. Highlights of Florida's LOER progress include:


- **Speeding up Lake O regulation schedule revisions:** Just two days after Gov. Bush unveiled LOER, the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) Governing Board formally requested the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to expedite modifications to the Lake Okeechobee Water Control plan, including revising the federal lake level regulation schedule to lower lake water levels and reduce harmful, high volume discharges to the estuaries. The Corps is working to complete the revision by December 2006.
- **Completed design** of the Nubbin Slough Stormwater Treatment Area (STA) Expansion Fast-Track project. Permit applications have been submitted. The project, located in the Taylor Creek/Nubbin Slough Basin north of Lake Okeechobee, is a 1,600-acre constructed wetland for treating basin runoff before it enters the lake. When construction is complete by December 2007, the STA will prevent more than 20 metric tons of phosphorus a year from entering Lake Okeechobee. Although phosphorus is a life-essential nutrient, excess amounts can harm the lake and estuary ecosystems.
- **Entered an agreement to store water on private land:** An agreement signed in January with agricultural producer Lykes Bros. Inc. will allow 2.4 billion gallons of lake water to be stored/disposed of on their land in Highlands County. The State is in discussions with other land owners to store additional water. Alternative storage will help reduce high flood-control lake discharge volumes to the estuaries.



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- **Completed** water storage assessment on public land in northern and southern Lake Okeechobee watersheds. Information from this assessment is being used to develop preliminary designs, costs and schedules for implementation. Excess water will be moved or diverted from the lake and its tributary basins to these alternative sites and stored to help reduce harmful high lake discharge volumes to the estuaries. The alternative sites will also complement storage reservoirs in the LOER Fast Track projects and those in the State's [Acceler8](#) Everglades Restoration program.
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- **Temporary forward pumps to arrive soon:** Will achieve a better balance among management objectives – flood control, water supply and navigation, and the competing needs of the lake, estuaries and greater Everglades ecosystem. This month, the SFWMD sought bids for 14 temporary forward pumps with delivery scheduled for June-August and ready to operate depending on lake levels and conditions. The temporary forward pumps will be used to convey lake water for communities and farms for water supply purposes if the lake level gets too low for the water to flow by gravity, such as during times of a drought. Permanent forward pumps and structures are under design.
 - **Authorized the rule revision process** this month to develop additional water quality and quantity criteria for Environmental Resource Permits in the Lake Okeechobee and Estuary Watersheds Basin. This action will address the water quality and quantity impacts due to new development and land-use changes within the LOER watersheds. Through the use of agricultural and neighborhood best management practices and stormwater management systems, a 25 to 50 percent reduction in the amount of phosphorus carried by water off of a parcel of land (load) is anticipated to have a measurable improvement downstream and will be one of the provisions of the revised Environmental Resource Permit.

For a copy of the LOER plan, including detailed descriptions, maps and timelines of each component, visit www.sfwmd.gov and click on the LOER icon.

How you can help improve Lake Okeechobee's health

Your participation is valuable to the success of LOER. You are invited to attend and provide input at upcoming LOER-related events, public meetings and workshops:

South Florida Water Management District Water Resources Advisory Commission
Lake Okeechobee Committee Meeting
Wednesday, Feb. 22
9 a.m.-3 p.m.
Okeechobee County Civic Center
1750 U.S. Highway 98 North, Okeechobee, FL 34972
<http://www.sfwmd.gov/gover/wrac/agendas.html>

Did you know?



- Since 2000, Florida has invested nearly \$100 million to improve farming practices, construct treatment wetlands and implement phosphorus reduction technologies to improve the health of America's second largest freshwater lake.
- LOER plan partners include the South Florida Water Management District, Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Florida Department of Community Affairs and Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.
- To date, more than 35 projects have been completed under the Lake Okeechobee Protection Program, in the north watershed area of Lake Okeechobee, achieving phosphorus reductions of almost 80 tons per year.
- Twenty-one additional projects are under way and expected to be complete in the next one to five years. Completion of all Lake Okeechobee projects will prevent more than 140 tons of phosphorus from entering the lake each year.
- In addition to improving water quality, these projects will add 92,334 acre-feet of additional water storage to reduce impacts from flood-control releases to the estuaries. That's enough to cover a football field with water 17 miles deep!

For more information about the Lake Okeechobee Protection Program, visit http://www.sfwmd.gov/org/wrp/wrp_okee/projects/protection_plan.html

Next Issue

Take a closer look at each of the nine LOER components, benefits and progress, starting with the Lake Okeechobee "Fast-Track" Projects.